

Motivations for Practice

Jonathan Earle

My motivations for practice are pretty simple. I think Zen Master Seung Sahn said it best in the Temple Rules: “You must first make a firm decision to attain enlightenment and help others.” My motivation is to attain my true self and save all beings from suffering. We hear that great vow all the time in our school: “Sentient beings are numberless. We vow to save them all.” We hear it after every retreat, and I say it every day when I get up in the morning. I hear it and say it all the time, but it has taken a long time for me to really believe in it. I certainly can’t say that my life is 100 percent in service of all beings, and maybe it never will be, but I do have a direction in my life.

When I first started practicing, I really liked the “get enlightenment” part, but I thought that the “helping others” part could wait. My goal was to get straight to the good stuff: *nirvana*! I thought maybe if I meditated hard enough, for long enough, and answered all the kong-ans right, some day it would just happen: I would be sitting there, looking at the floor, and then . . . *boom*! I would get a sudden realization that the whole universe and I were the same, and I would understand all of the divine truths about God, and reincarnation, and Truth. Then, of course, having attained Complete Unexcelled Enlightenment, I would wander the Chinese countryside looking for other learned masters to engage with in dharma combat. I would build a hut of reeds on top of a mountain, and meditate under a waterfall, and young monks would come from far and wide to study with me and, and . . .

Needless to say, when I first showed up at the Barnstable Unitarian Church (where the Cape Cod Zen Center used to meet) one Friday night four years ago, I had high expectations. The evening started off well: we chanted a sutra about form and emptiness (I had read about that in the *Tao Te Ching*!), and then something in Korean—maybe some sort of spell to awaken the Third Eye? However, after that the night went downhill: We just sat still for 20 minutes, and then we walked for 10 minutes, and then we sat again for 20. Those were some of the longest 50 minutes of my life, and nothing really interesting happened.

No dancing goddesses, I wasn’t attacked by demons, and I didn’t reach any mystical states of being. Yet I have been coming back to the Cape Cod Zen Center ever since.

I started a spiritual quest of sorts, relatively young, when I was about 13. I am not exactly sure why I started this quest at such a young age, but I think somehow I innately understood that desire creates suffering (although I wouldn’t have been able to articulate that insight). When I was little I would beg my parents to buy me a certain toy, and if they didn’t I would feel sad or upset.



If they did buy me the toy, just as soon as it was purchased I would want a different toy. When I got a little older my objects of desire changed from physical things to mental things. For weeks on end I would be obsessed with paleontology, and then my interest would change to aliens and UFOs. My attachment to words and speech caused a lot of suffering for me, so I began studying religion, hoping I could find something to cling to, something that would answer my questions about life. I read books about everything from Islam to Shintoism, and I still couldn’t find the answer that I wanted. Somehow, I found a book called *Essential Zen*. I found the stories, poems and kong-ans fascinating, even though I didn’t understand them. I knew that those old Chinese masters had figured something out. They had figured it out,

they had gotten it, attained it. And I wanted it too.

So that is how I discovered Zen. I understood from that first evening at the Unitarian church that Zen is a completely different way of life than what most of us experience. Although Zen is not separate at all from our daily life, it still offers a way of living that is compassionate, aware and kind. I continue to practice Zen, and I want to become a teacher because I sincerely believe that our practice can help everyone.

If I become a teacher, I can share this practice—and what I have attained, if anything—with others. And I can do my part to save all beings. I have had the good fortune in my life to encounter the dharma, and so becoming a teacher is my way of giving back to the sangha, and the whole world. I understand that becoming a dharma teacher-in-training will be a big responsibility, and I will have to learn the correct forms and how to help people who are new to Zen. But I feel ready. My practice has been going well, and I meditate

whenever possible, at least 20 minutes a day. I try to go to retreats whenever possible (which will hopefully be more frequent once I get my driver's license). I think that becoming a dharma teacher-in-training is simply the natural next step in practice.

Not long after I went to the Zen center for the first time, I was in the bathroom washing my hands. I looked in the mirror, and I suddenly realized what I had gotten myself into with this "Zen stuff." I recognized that, one way or another, I would be doing Zen for the rest of my life. So only go straight. Try, try, try for ten thousand years! ♦



Jonathan Earle is currently a sophomore studying biology at Marlboro College. He took five precepts in 2009, and will become a dharma teacher this April. When he's not in school, he lives in Barnstable, Mass., with his family, and he practices at the Cape Cod Zen Center.

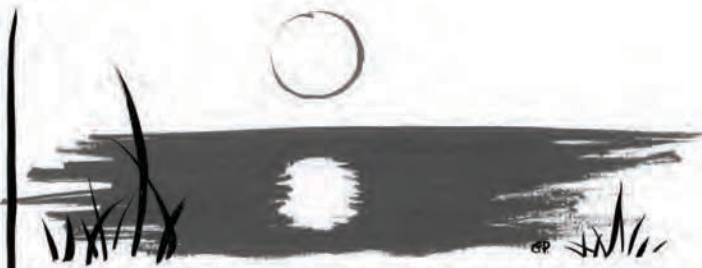


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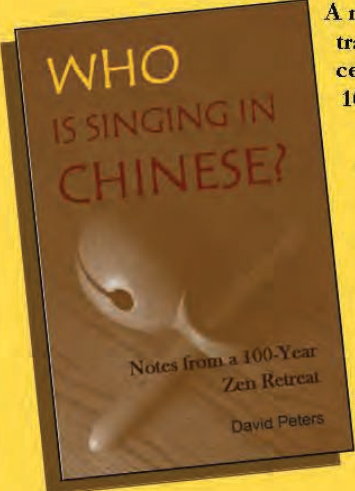
"Clear mind is like the full moon in the sky. Sometimes clouds come and cover it, but the moon is always behind them. Clouds go away, then the moon shines brightly. So don't worry about clear mind: it is always there. ... Thinking comes and goes, comes and goes. You must not be attached to the coming or the going." -Zen Master Seung Sahn

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